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## Organizing Opposition in the Teachers' Movement in Oaxaca

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## Organizing Opposition in the Teachers' Movement in Oaxaca

### Abstract

[Excerpt] This essay examines the continuing struggle of rank-and-file teachers to democratize the SNTE, a union of between 800,000 and one million members linked to the PRI. In particular, the essay analyzes the dissident movement's strategy of organizing to hold and win elections in union locals, and assesses the advantages and limitations of this strategy over a ten-year period (1979-1989). What were the implications of organizing within an official union for the movement's internal organization, demands, strategies, and ability to achieve its goals?

This essay is divided into three parts. The first looks at the official union as an institution that structured the protest movement within it. The laws, procedures, organizational structure, and leadership of the union set boundaries for the movement's actions, shaping, though not fully determining, its demands, strategies, organization, and what it was able to achieve. The second part examines how the movement overcame some of these constraints in pursuing a legal or institutional strategy to democratize the union. This part also analyzes the gains and limitations of the movement's legal strategy as experienced by those sections of the movement that obtained legal recognition. The last part looks at how changes in the movement's political environment affected the ability to achieve its goals. This section focuses on the Oaxacan case and argues that the relations between government and union officials were crucial to understanding the movement's important breakthroughs, as well as the limits to organizing within official unions.

### Keywords

Mexico, teachers, union, organization, National Union of Workers in Education, SNTE

### Disciplines

International and Comparative Labor Relations | Labor Relations | Unions

### Comments

#### Suggested Citation

Cook, M. L. (1990). Organizing opposition in the teachers' movement in Oaxaca [Electronic version]. In J. Foweraker & A. L. Craig (Eds.), *Popular movements and political change in Mexico* (pp. 199-212). Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers.

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## Organizing Opposition in the Teachers' Movement in Oaxaca

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MARIA LORENA COOK

*What was won must be Judged  
by what was possible.*

In the second half of the 1970s, dissident unionists in Mexico directed their efforts to organizing within official labor unions and confederations (San Juan 1984:120). This move was influenced by both strategic and structural considerations: Most workers were located in official organizations, and the government was no longer as willing to recognize independent unions. Still, given union leaders' strong opposition to internal dissent, their government support, and superior access to resources, dissident organizing within official unions was tantamount to organizing "in the belly of the beast." The effort required to organize an opposition movement in this context was enormous, the costs high, and the gains limited. Teachers in Mexico nevertheless managed to sustain one of the largest and longest-lived opposition movements of the last twenty years in Mexico's largest official union, the National Union of Workers in Education (the SNTE).

The rank-and-file teachers' movement in Mexico emerged in 1979-1980 within union locals throughout the country. It arose in response to declining real wages,<sup>1</sup> serious paycheck delays, outdated regional wage differentials,<sup>2</sup> poor health services, corruption, and the lack of democracy within the union. In 1979 several regional teachers' movements formed the dissident CNTE, the National Coordinating Committee of Workers in Education. In 1980-1981 movements in the states of Oaxaca, Chiapas, Morelos, Guerrero, and Hidalgo, and in the Valle de Mexico fought for economic demands and for the right to elect new local committees, ridding these of leaders linked to the Revolutionary Vanguard, the group that had exerted control over the union since 1972. Whereas all of the regional movements shared this political goal, only the Oaxacan and Chiapas movements obtained official recognition and control over their locals.<sup>3</sup> Chiapas Local 7 maintained this control until 1987, when the executive committee was decertified by national union officials, and Oaxaca retained control throughout the decade. In 1989 the teachers' movement reemerged nationally and democratic control of locals was again extended to Chiapas as

well as to primary and preschool teachers in Mexico City (see Arriaga 1981; Hernandez 1986, 1989; Hernandez and Perez Arce 1982; Pelaez 1980-1984; and Salinas and Imaz Gispert 1984).

This essay examines the continuing struggle of rank-and-file teachers to democratize the SNTE, a union of between 800,000 and one million members linked to the PRI. In particular, the essay analyzes the dissident movement's strategy of organizing to hold and win elections in union locals, and assesses the advantages and limitations of this strategy over a ten-year period (1979-1989). What were the implications of organizing within an official union for the movement's internal organization, demands, strategies, and ability to achieve its goals?

This essay is divided into three parts. The first looks at the official union as an institution that structured the protest movement within it. The laws, procedures, organizational structure, and leadership of the union set boundaries for the movement's actions, shaping, though not fully determining, its demands, strategies, organization, and what it was able to achieve. The second part examines how the movement overcame some of these constraints in pursuing a legal or institutional strategy to democratize the union. This part also analyzes the gains and limitations of the movement's legal strategy as experienced by those sections of the movement that obtained legal recognition. The last part looks at how changes in the movement's political environment affected the ability to achieve its goals. This section focuses on the Oaxacan case and argues that the relations between government and union officials were crucial to understanding the movement's important breakthroughs, as well as the limits to organizing within official unions.

## THE OFFICIAL UNION AS STRUCTURING INSTITUTION

The CNTE's decision to organize within rather than outside the union was the outcome of both a political struggle among leaders of the movement and an encounter with legal and political barriers to independent union organization (Hernandez and Perez Arce 1982). Public-sector employees were governed by a separate section of the labor code that permitted only one union in each sector. Most dissident public-sector workers therefore organized factions within their unions, in some instances winning local or delegation executive committees. At the time the dissident CNTE was formed, it had the support of approximately 15 percent of the SNTE membership, far below the majority it would have needed to force the government to recognize an alternate union. As a result, the CNTE remained within the union and pursued a legal strategy that involved organizing to win control of local executive committees through elections. Union positions could then be used to support and extend the democratic movement (Hernandez and Perez Arce 1982:41).

The fact that the movement emerged and remained within an official union shaped its composition, demands, and organizational structure. Move-

ment participants came together by virtue of their profession and their membership in the union (which included manual and administrative workers as well as teachers). The movement's organization closely paralleled the levels of organization within the union locals (delegations, local committees), and the union local was the principal unit of organization for the movement. The CNTE thus represented an alliance of regional (local) movements within the union, rather than an alliance across sectors between popular organizations, and it was structured as a loose network of local movements that retained regional autonomy.

The professional membership of the union shaped the movement's demands as well. In spite of the peasant and working-class origins of many teachers and the important role they played in poor communities, the demands of the teachers' movement corresponded to the specific economic and professional needs of union members. Nevertheless, many teachers participated in peasant struggles for land, in opposing municipal elections, and in organizing for basic services in communities (Hernandez 1988a). The CNTE was also instrumental in forging alliances with other popular organizations to oppose government austerity policies and repression against the organizations in the mid-1980s (Prieto 1986:89). The union's primarily female membership did not appear to have shaped the movement's demands in a central way. The leadership of the movement, as well as of the union, was overwhelmingly male dominated, and even some of the most militant women participants felt that to introduce "women's" demands would be to risk dividing the movement. Recently male and female attitudes toward the role of women in the movement have begun to change as a result of several years of men and women participating equally in the movement, if not in leadership positions.

The teachers' movement maintained a position of autonomy with respect to political parties. According to the rank and file, union leaders' commitments to the government party were responsible for their failure to represent members. The party-union separation, however, was also an effort to curb party factionalism and maintain unity within the teachers' movement. Because of widespread rank-and-file mistrust of political parties and party activists, further restrictions were placed on the participation of political parties and currents within the movement, even though the most active movement participants typically belonged to some political organization. Members recognized political organizations' contributions to the movement, yet they rejected attempts to place party interests above the interests of the teachers' movement.<sup>4</sup>

The centralized structure of the union inhibited expressions of dissent. The National Executive Committee (CEN) authorized all electoral congresses at the local level, controlled the distribution of finances to the locals, and held important powers of intervention at local and delegation assemblies (de la Garza Toledo 1982:40-43). Nevertheless, officials regularly denied authorization of electoral congresses for political reasons, and finances normally allocated to local committees were withheld by national union

authorities as a way of pressuring dissident locals. Union officials could also draw on the statutes to suspend or expel workers for "disloyalty, lack of discipline, and treason," and for activities said to "threaten the unity and integrity of the union," charges used to control the activities of dissidents within the union (de la Garza Toledo 1982:41). The history of labor conflict within the union was also marked by the use of violence—the intimidation, beating, kidnapping, imprisonment, and murder of union dissidents. In 1989 the Mexican news agency Notimex estimated that 150 union dissidents had been killed since the beginning of the movement (see *Uno mas Uno*, April 24, 1989).

The SNTE was dominated by a faction that came to power in 1972 after illegally expelling the secretary general of the union. The act was a coup by one faction, led by Carlos Jonguitud Barrios, against another that had been in power since 1949. The support of the Echeverría administration for the new leadership was evident in the economic, material, and institutional concessions the union obtained throughout the remainder of the president's term (Hernandez 1982b:48-49; Pelaez 1984:166). Jonguitud used the considerable resources of the union to raise his and the union's political profile (Greaves 1980:91). He also set about to consolidate his control of the union by creating the Revolutionary Vanguard, a political-ideological instrument of the union leadership. Jonguitud was named president-for-life of the Vanguard, enabling him to circumvent union statutes that prevented reelection and to retain control of the union after his term as secretary general ended.

The Revolutionary Vanguard developed an impressive membership network. In the states, *vanguardistas* occupied administrative positions and controlled school districts and the careers of teachers through clientelism and corruption (Hernandez 1982b:49-50). Union officials also held government and party positions at national, state, and municipal levels, blurring the boundaries between union and state power and providing *vanguardistas* with external resources to extend their control. Jonguitud himself became a member of the PRI's National Executive Committee, president of the Labor Congress, director general of the ISSSTE (the social security agency for public employees), and governor of the state of San Luis Potosí. Opposition to the Vanguard and its practices became one of the defining elements of the teachers' movement. As one teacher from Oaxaca put it, "People may not be very clear about what they're fighting for, but they're clear about being against the Vanguard," (personal interview, February 1987).

## CONSEQUENCES OF THE LEGAL STRATEGY

The movement's pursuit of a legal strategy to democratize the union had several implications and consequences. In pursuing this legal strategy, the movement was forced to adopt extralegal and even illegal tactics. The

clearest expression of the use of both was evident in the organization of the movement. By controlling the statutory or formally recognized structures of the union, the movement could officially claim to represent its members and legally bargain on their behalf. But the movement also created alternative organizations that derived their legitimacy from member support and use rather than from official recognition. One document from the movement noted, "We should learn to make broad use of legality, but we should also create our own forms of organization and struggle, even though these may not be legal from the point of view of the *charro* statutes or the repressive government" (SNTE, Sección 7 1983:16).

The first organizations of the movement were strike committees (*comites de lucha*), organized roughly by delegation or several delegations together. Committee representatives then made up the central struggle committee, which made decisions for the movement. Central struggle committees formed in most of the insurgent locals during 1979-1981. In most cases, the organizations of the movement existed alongside the legal structures of the local. After legality, both the Oaxacan and Chiapas movements made additional changes to the parallel and statutory organizations, in a conscious effort to increase member participation in decisionmaking. A state assembly composed of representatives from each delegation (including the rank and file and delegation officials) took primacy over the local executive committee in making decisions that affected the entire local. Important proposals presented at state assembly meetings were taken back to the delegations and schools for consultation with the membership. These issues were discussed at workplace and delegation meetings, and the decisions reached were taken back to the next state assembly meeting, where a vote was taken. In general, workplace, delegation, and regional problems were resolved at the corresponding organizational levels within the local. In the delegations, five-member coordinating committees were formed in addition to the statutory executive committees. These coordinating committees were in charge of the more political aspects of union organization at the delegation level, such as promoting member participation and education. Coordinating committees were also created at sectoral and regional levels to improve communication within the local and to decentralize the resolution of problems.

Legal status, however, did not guarantee that the movement's demands would be met or even heard. As a rule, the movement presented its demands through the established channels. Movement participants tried to get local and national union officials to spearhead or respond to demands, before attempting direct tactics that ranged from ousting the officials to bypassing them in order to appeal directly to higher authorities. Often, however, the locals were forced to rely on their ability to mobilize supporters and their capacity to disrupt. Mobilizations were typically combined with legal appeals and negotiations. That members decided the actions they would take strengthened the membership's ability to engage repeatedly in collective action; members had control over, and therefore some commitment to, movement activities. As a result, the mobilizations were often a reliable

gauge of the movement's strength.

The membership of the democratic locals developed a degree of autonomy that enabled it to resist continued attacks. Members questioned and challenged their elected leaders and eventually selected new representatives whom they perceived as being closer to their own interests; these were usually people who had less contact with union and government officials. Members frequently insisted on sustaining mobilizations longer than their leaders did; in Oaxaca in 1985-1986 and Chiapas in 1987, members demonstrated that they were willing to mobilize for political demands alone—for democratic elections in their locals. These and other developments signaled that members were increasingly unlikely to accept the paternalism and clientelism that were pervasive in other parts of the union.

The electoral renewal of the local committees highlighted the central dilemma of the movement's legal strategy. Continuity of the movement's legal status depended on the CEN's willingness to authorize the elections. Union officials used their power to authorize local elections in order to pressure the movement into giving up seats on its executive committee. When this strategy failed, officials withheld authorization in an effort to divide and weaken the movement. Fighting the CEN on this issue called for a tremendous mobilization of resources, and the failure to advance on the election issue generated tensions within the movement. Differences developed between some members of the executive committee and the state assembly over tactics: the leaders' excessive reliance on negotiations against the use of mobilizations, and whether to focus on the election issue exclusively (a regional issue) or broaden demands to include other sectors in joint mobilizations.

Executive committee leaders were often in the contradictory position of having to appear radical to their membership and moderate to government and union officials. Union and government officials pressured leaders to accept compromise solutions without consulting their membership. Members, in turn, suspected leaders of negotiating behind their backs or of concealing information, causing them to challenge leaders openly in the state assembly. These internal relations were complicated by the stipulation that a new executive committee could not be elected without authorized elections, for fear that the union would use the event of unauthorized elections to impose its own committee.

This lack of trust between members and some executive committee leaders threatened the unity of the movement. In Oaxaca, however, members adopted creative solutions in response to the election debate and to the internal strains developing from it. The state assembly rejected the option that the CEN was trying to impose—negotiating *vanguardista* representation on the executive committee. At the same time, the assembly voted to develop member participation in rank-and-file organizations, expand the executive committee with rank-and-file assistants, improve relations with parents (which were strained due to the strikes), and work closely with other members of the CNTE in an effort to break out of isolation (FMIN



1985:23). The movement therefore reacted to the pressure not by centralizing decisionmaking, but by extending "horizontally"—developing its alliances and its democratic features.

## CENTRAL CONFLICT AND REGIONAL MOVEMENTS: OAXACA

After the formation of the SNTE in 1943, the union played an important part in its support for the government party and for presidential candidates, particularly in its role as a party electoral machine during elections. In exchange, union leaders occupied positions in the party and government, becoming senators, federal deputies, party presidents, and directors of federal agencies. This alliance between the union and the government-party was not new when Jonguitud came to power, but it reached new dimensions under Echeverría. Still, the growing political and economic power of the union, which had made it an effective ally of the government, became an obstacle to government efforts to reform Mexican education in the late 1970s.

### State-Union Conflict and the Emergence of the Movement, 1978-1983

The successes and limits of the teachers' movement cannot be fully understood without taking into account the larger context of the union's relations with the government. At the beginning of the movement, conflict between the SNTE and officials in the Ministry of Education (SEP) under López Portillo led state officials to tolerate the movement in order to pressure the SNTE (Hernández 1986:66; Pescador and Torres 1985:4-5). Particular events contributed to an overall climate of conflict that benefited the dissident movement: the formation of the National Education University (UPN), changes in the requirements for the training of teachers, the union's demand for more deputy and senate seats and for greater participation in the formulation of education policy, and the deconcentration<sup>5</sup> of the administration (Peláez 1984:207; Pescador and Torres 1985).

The particular ways in which government-union conflict was expressed had different implications for rank-and-file teachers and for the opposition movement. The struggle over the formation of the UPN reflected deep differences between the government's technocrats and the more traditional union politicians (Kovács 1983; Pescador and Torres 1985), but this conflict was relatively contained within an institution of higher education based in Mexico City. In contrast, the deconcentration of the SEP had an important impact on rank-and-file teachers. It affected practically all union members at once; it disrupted regional relations of power within the union without providing a strong substitute authority in the SEP delegation, and it forced union leaders to turn to the mobilization of their members rather than fall back on the more traditional forms of bargaining with SEP officials. As a

result, SEP-SNTE conflict was displaced from the arena of high-level negotiations, unleashing rank-and-file mobilizations that later became difficult to control. Moreover, members were mobilized in support of the specific interests of their leaders (e.g., removal of SEP delegates) but not in support of member needs, such as wage increases. These conditions enabled groups of dissident teachers to emerge and organize, and facilitated the formation of a *national* opposition movement within the union.

In 1978 officials in the SEP initiated the administrative deconcentration of the ministry in order to address the problems associated with the enormous size and centralization of the system. Among these problems was the lack of information about and control over the availability, use, and distribution of resources in the states, and severe delays in the issuance of employee paychecks. The goal of the administrative reform consisted of modernizing educational planning and the personnel administration by substituting technical criteria for the personalist criteria that had thus far prevailed in the allocation and distribution of resources (Street 1984:18). A related, though unwritten, objective of the deconcentration was to launch a surprise attack on the power base of the union in the states, in order to "cut the octopus's tentacles" (personal interview with SEP official, September 1987). The ministry thus set out to undermine the union's pervasive influence over SEP personnel in the states, which was seen as the main obstacle to reform.

Before 1978 the union's power was based on its control of the assignment, administration, and promotion of personnel, through a chain of command that linked school directors and superintendents with federal directors and directors general of education in the states, many of whom were loyal to the union (Street 1984:18). The deconcentration tightened central control over these processes by establishing one delegation in each state and granting the SEP delegates—who answered directly to the education minister—control over the programming of resources and matters relating to teaching personnel, undermining the authority previously enjoyed by the directors general (Street 1984:15-16).

These measures threw the SEP into "a brutal confrontation with the union" (personal interview with SEP official, August 1987). Union officials responded by refusing to cooperate with the new delegates. In many cases, strikes and building occupations were organized by the union in order to pressure the SEP into removing delegates. The conflict over the deconcentration thus took place in the states, upset regional power relations, and directly affected rank-and-file teachers. At the same time, the creation of SEP delegations increased the autonomy of union locals vis-a-vis the National Executive Committee by making the channels of communication between the SEP and teachers more direct, and also by making the delegations more vulnerable to pressure from union members at the regional level (Pescador and Torres 1985:50-51).

The SEP also planned to decentralize the system of payment to SEP employees in response to a severe payments crisis in which employees typically received paychecks months behind schedule. The payments problem

spread discontent among rank-and-file teachers and was used by union officials as a mobilizing tool to protest the administrative reforms. In Oaxaca, prior to the emergence of the movement, local union officials mobilized members around the payments issue in a campaign to oust the SEP delegate. Their call to strike backfired, however, when rank-and-file teachers moved beyond the demands of their local officials in May 1980 and called for wage increases and the removal of the local executive committee (Yescas Martinez and Zafra 1985:105-106). Many delegation officials, dissatisfied with the way the new secretary general had been selected during a local congress held earlier that year, also joined the emerging movement.

Delegation committee representatives voted to reject the executive committee on May 13, 1980 (Pelaez 1980:72; Yescas Martinez and Zafra 1985:94). A commission tried to negotiate with national union officials to hold new elections, but national authorities threw their support behind the rejected secretary general. The dissident teachers then went to Mexico City in order to pressure the National Executive Committee to spearhead their demands and to authorize new elections. Both the CEN and the Ministry of Education promised to address the movement's demands, but negotiations with the Oaxaca commission were abandoned after verbal agreements led Oaxacan teachers to lift their strike and return to their state. Finally, a day-long work stoppage was called by the CNTE on June 9, 1980, and approximately 70,000 teachers—including contingents from Chiapas, Morelos, Guerrero, Queretaro, Mexico City, and the Valle de Mexico—marched and then camped out in front of SEP and SNTE offices in Mexico City (Pelaez 1980:78). After twenty-four hours and the CEN's refusal to negotiate the movement's economic demands, the Ministry of the Interior intervened and led the CEN to the negotiating table with the Oaxaca commission. The CEN was forced by the Ministry of the Interior to accept a transitional executive commission in Oaxaca, in which all twelve members except for the president would be elected by the dissidents, and the president would be appointed by the CEN. This arrangement represented a structural change in the union local's government that opened the possibility of democratic elections. Other regional movements reached similar agreements in the ensuing months.

The reasons for the Ministry of the Interior's hard-line position with officials of the SNTE probably ran deeper than the union's inability to keep its members from erupting onto the streets of Mexico City. The government may have been interested in curbing the SNTE's power in the context of the presidential succession, particularly given the union's demands for political appointments and for the position of education minister in the next administration. The interior minister had also been an executive committee member in the SNTE in the late 1950s, when it was dominated by the faction that Jonguitud later ousted in 1972.

Although an interim commission was established in Oaxaca, CEN officials dragged their feet in authorizing elections. Repeated mobilizations, together with pressure on the part of the governor of Oaxaca, finally enabled

Oaxacan teachers to elect a new local committee in February 1982.

### **The State-Union Alliance, 1983-1988**

The 1982 change in administration and the economic crisis altered the context of government-union relations and affected conditions for the dissident movement. The new SEP minister, Jesus Reyes Heróles, still came into conflict with the union over the decentralization of education, but the government was also harsher on dissident movements. The labor movement's initial militant reaction to the economic crisis was halted by the de la Madrid administration's firm response to labor protests in 1983. The new administration also dealt a blow to the CNTE by decentralizing the National Teachers College in Mexico City and closing its main campus. The school had been operating as the unofficial headquarters of the CNTE and was a meeting place for movement leaders from all over the country who attended its summer courses. The economic crisis also marked the beginning of a period (1982-1989) in which teachers' real wages would fall by 63 percent (Guzman Ortiz and Vela Glez 1989:47). The crisis generated discontent but also limited the possibility of winning economic demands, and it reduced the amount of time teachers could devote to the movement as many teachers were forced to seek additional income.

The pressure of a mass movement on the government had also largely disappeared. The CNTE's last large national mobilization was during the June 1983 strike wave. By 1982-1983, the CNTE was fighting its battles regionally rather than nationally: Oaxaca and Chiapas already had their democratic executive committees, and Morelos, the Valle de Mexico, Hidalgo, and Guerrero had been weakened.

By 1983 union officials of the SNTE had had time to reorganize (Hernandez 1986:69; Prieto 1986:79). The reduction of substantive conflict with the state by the end of 1983 also released the CEN to focus on the dissident movement in the states. In their strategy to recover old losses and preempt new ones, CEN officials sent top cadres to Oaxaca and Chiapas in order to organize opposition to the democratic locals. In October 1983, *vanguardistas* occupied union headquarters in Oaxaca and took several democratic members hostage. A large crowd of teachers and supporters gathered outside, and eventually police were sent in to remove the occupants. Days later, *vanguardistas* in the state formed a parallel executive committee in an effort to take over executive functions and win members away from the democratic local, but the attempt failed. In addition, union officials had already begun to lash out at the dissident movement in other states, violating agreements for electoral congresses with movements in Hidalgo, Morelos, and the Valle de Mexico.

After Reyes Heróles's death in 1985, Miguel Gonzalez Avelar was appointed to head the SEP. The new education minister adopted a conciliatory position toward the union; his interest in the presidential nomination appeared to weaken his resolve to delimit the power and activities of the union. The

SNTE was able to negotiate the appointment of directors of the delegations, now called Educational Services Units to be Decentralized, or USED (Martmez Assad and Ziccardi 1988:37-38).<sup>6</sup> Union resistance to SEP delegates had already given way in many states to a greater *vanguardista* presence in the delegations, the removal of unpopular delegates, and power sharing in some areas (Pescador and Torres 1985:50-51; Street 1984:20-21).

This alliance between state and union officials greatly narrowed the Oaxacan movement's access to political and economic resources and limited the effectiveness of its mobilizations. National union officials began a campaign to wear out the movement by extending, then retracting, authorization for local elections to renew the executive committee. Union officials withheld authorization of the Oaxaca local's elections every year between 1985 and 1989 until after Jonguitud's removal from the union. Leaders that were to have remained in office for only three years, according to union statutes, were forced to remain at the head of the movement for seven. According to movement leaders, after 1985 the USED began to employ *vanguardistas* who blocked petitions coming from the local. National union authorities also cut off the local's share of dues remissions in May 1986. *Vanguardistas* were sent to work at schools without appropriate credentials and in violation of earlier agreements the movement had forged with the SEP on the criteria for transfers and hiring. National union officials attacked the movement on all fronts, threatening simultaneously its ability to bargain and petition on behalf of its members, its legal status and formal continuity, its access to resources, and its unity. The movement's few resources were diverted to fight battles in the schools, and conflict with the local SEP offices increased. The limited autonomy of the democratic locals—their vulnerability to the actions of national union officials—was never more evident than during this period.

Months of mobilizing with limited results placed the Oaxacan organization under tremendous pressure and strain. Nonetheless, it remained unified between 1985 and 1988, managing to avoid the divisive factionalism that had become public in the Chiapas leadership (Campa 1988). In February 1989 the Oaxaca local elected a new executive committee during its pre-congress, for the second time since 1985, and again national officials postponed the congress date.<sup>7</sup> After the teachers' movement gained strength nationwide in April and May and Jonguitud was removed from the union, the executive committee was finally ratified in the presence of the new secretary general of the SNTE, Elba Esther Gordillo.

### The Renewal of Conflict, 1989

After the presidential elections of July 1988, national political conditions in Mexico changed. For Mexico City residents in particular, the success of Cuauhtemoc Cardenas's presidential campaign (the *cardenistas* won the capital) provided a needed boost to popular organizing efforts throughout the

city and eroded the authority of the Salinas administration. At the same time, the dramatic arrest of the leader of the Mexican oil workers' union in January 1989 was a sign from Salinas that traditional labor bosses were no longer inviolate, rekindling old demands for union democracy in a number of areas. Meanwhile, the SNTE reverted to its traditional methods of manipulating delegation assemblies throughout the country and obstructing the opposition in the selection of delegates to its national congress in February. The discontent generated by these maneuvers and by Jonguitud's tight control over positions of union power revealed dissension among former allies of the union boss. Severe wage erosion had also spread the discontent to locals throughout the country.

These factors converged in the spring of 1989 to produce one of the largest teachers' strikes in the history of the SNTE. The dissident movement encompassed far more than the traditional CNTE centers of support. It included rank-and-file members who had never participated in the movement, as well as disgruntled *vanguardistas* and other factions of union officials. The Salinas government seized upon this moment to displace a union boss whose internal support and benefit to the political system had seriously deteriorated. In the wake of this removal, the striking teachers succeeded in extending democratic union local committees to Oaxaca, Chiapas, and to the union's largest local—Local 9 of primary and preschool teachers in Mexico City. In other locals, dissidents gained representation on temporary executive commissions and obtained agreements to hold elections. In spite of later setbacks, the dissident teachers achieved more during this period than they had at any point since the founding of the CNTE in 1979.

Prior to the reemergence of the dissident movement in 1989, the general refusal of union and government officials to respond to the movement's demands—and in particular, to requests for elections—appeared to signal the effective containment of the movement. The events in early 1989, however, offer the clearest evidence of the difference that changes in the political environment make for popular movements, particularly for those contained within official institutions. The movement's successes during this period reflected a decade of CNTE activism and experience and the consolidation of the democratic movements in Oaxaca and Chiapas. But the closure of union and government authorities and the limited gains of the movement between 1983 and 1988 contrasted sharply with the movement's advances of 1989. It took the convergence of state-union conflict with the massive mobilization of discontented union members to achieve breakthroughs similar to those of the 1979-1981 period.

## CONCLUSIONS

The democratic teachers' movement in Mexico highlights the limits and possibilities of organizing opposition within official unions. The institutional and legal context in which the movement emerged precluded some strategic

choices from being adopted; instead of organizing as an independent union, the movement remained within the union. As a result, the movement had to confront the constraints to dissident organizing inherent in the union's statutes, organizational structures, leadership, and political ties. In employing both legal and extralegal measures to circumvent some of these constraints and gain a foothold within the union, the dissident movement used legality but was not bound by it.

The legal strategy pursued by the movement had positive consequences, but it also presented the democratic locals with a dilemma. During an initial period of increased autonomy for the movements, internal structures and procedures were altered to broaden member participation in decisionmaking and to increase the accountability of leaders. Legal status facilitated the democratization of the movement, which in turn influenced a new generation of teachers that entered the movement in the 1980s. But continuity of the movement's legal status depended on its securing the permission of its enemies—national union officials. This was the dilemma and central constraint of the legal strategy.

Changes in the movement's larger political environment, and the way the movement took advantage of these, were therefore crucial to its development. State-union conflict aided the emergence of the national teachers' movement, and government intervention in negotiations produced important changes and advances for the movement (representation on interim committees and election timetables). On these occasions, pressure by the dissident movement converged with a government interest in applying leverage against SNTA officials. In contrast, when union officials were not constrained or had the cooperation of government officials, they succeeded in changing conditions in the states so that opposition locals found it more difficult to manage and gains were increasingly limited.

The lack of a political opening rendered the movement's mobilization strategy ineffective and placed strong pressure on movement leaders to negotiate and compromise without mobilizing their forces. At the same time, however, the democratic organization of the membership kept pressure on leaders and forced them to remain accountable to members despite the lack of elections. As a result, the movement was able to survive intact in spite of its hostile environment. The dissident teachers' movement thus draws attention to the opportunities presented by conflicts within official institutions and to internal democracy as important elements in the organization and survival of popular movements.

## NOTES

This essay is based on research supported by the Inter-American Foundation in 1986-1987. This write-up of the research was supported by a fellowship from the Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies, University of California, San Diego, during 1988-1989. I want to thank Paul Haber for comments on an earlier version of this paper. I alone am responsible for the errors or misinterpretations that remain. The results

of this larger research project, as well as details on the points presented in this chapter, can be found in Cook 1990.

The epigraph at the beginning of this chapter is taken from Piven and Cloward, 1979:xiii.

1. Real wages for teachers began to fall after 1976, recovered slightly during the peak of the movement (1979-1981), then plummeted after 1981. On teachers' wages see Aboites 1984 and 1986, and Guzman Ortiz and Vela Glez 1989.

2. These differentials were calculated as a percentage of the base wage. The percentages varied from one region to the next, reflecting differences in the cost of living. At the time of the Chiapas movement's emergence in 1979, the regional differentials had not been adjusted in thirty years.

3. In Chiapas two locals, one of federalized teachers (Local 7) and one of state teachers (Local 40), obtained this status. Both belonged to the SNTE. This essay focuses on the federalized teachers.

4. The formation of the Party of the Democratic Revolution under Cardenas (PRD) has since led some groups to reassess the movement's relationship to political parties.

5. Deconcentration was the first phase in the planned decentralization of public education in Mexico. Deconcentration referred to the delegation of authority to a lower level of the SEP, whereas decentralization referred to the transfer of responsibility and resources for education to state governments. For an excellent analysis of the deconcentration of the SEP and its effects on the union, see Street 1983 and 1984. On decentralization see Martinez Assad and Ziccardi 1988, and Pescador and Torres 1985.

6. See also "Carta de la CNTE a Bartlett" in *La Jornada*, October 23, 1987: "The majority of ministry positions have been turned over to them, so that almost all of the educational services units and the regional services coordinating committees in the states are occupied by bureaucrats who belong to the Vanguard."

7. The official events were presided over by representatives from the CEN, so prior events were held to elect congress delegates and executive committee slates, so as to avoid confrontations and divisions at the official congress. In Oaxaca, delegate selection had taken place in 1985, but the pregress was postponed; in 1986 the pregress was held. On both occasions, the CEN rescinded authorization for the congresses at the last minute.